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Economic calculations, instability and (in)formalisation of the state in Mauritania, 2003–2011

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ABSTRACT This article describes the transformations of the state in Mauritania in 2003–2011 in terms of the concrete practices of economic policy management. It questions the relationship to the state in a context of massive informality and where circumvention of the rules and misappropriation are major political repertoires. Nevertheless, my observations suggest that it is useful to study the rules and formal procedures in concrete terms in order to decode the way that they structure power relations in Mauritania, and that this analysis can be used to investigate the transformations of the state. I propose a reinterpretation of Mauritania's political trajectory seen through the prism of the concrete practices of economic management. This reveals that, despite major deception in relation to macroeconomic figures revealed in 2005, technocratic activity continued in an "ocean of transgression".

RÉSUMÉ Cet article rend compte des transformations de l'Etat en Mauritanie entre 2003 et 2011 par le biais des pratiques concrètes de la gestion des politiques économiques. Il questionne le rapport à l'Etat dans un contexte où l'informalité est massive et où le contournement des règles et l'arnaque sont des répertoires politiques majeurs. Néanmoins, mon constat indique qu'il est intéressant de décrypter la manière dont les règles et procédures formelles, étudiées au concret, structurent les rapports de pouvoir en Mauritanie, et que cette analyse peut servir à interroger les transformations de l'Etat. Je propose une relecture de la trajectoire politique nationale au prisme des pratiques concrètes de gestion de l'économie. Il en ressort que, même lors des importants mensonges sur les chiffres macroéconomiques, dévoilés en 2005, l'action technocratique a pu se maintenir dans un « océan de transgression ».

Keywords: informality; numbers; macroeconomic management; political economy; Africa

Introduction

In September 2004, the new governor of the Central Bank of Mauritania flew to Washington DC with a tough mission to complete. He had to confess to the World Bank and IMF officials that a massive statistical lie had taken place in Mauritania in the past few years. He had the president's approval to do so; Maaouya Ould Taya was losing his control over the administration as well as the economic and financial elite. Large amounts were spent off-budget and the foreign currencies reserves of the Central Bank were looted. After this "misreporting", the country underwent international sanctions; it had to launch a large process of reform and revision of all macroeconomic data, and a whole new national economic history emerged (Islamic Republic of Mauritania 2006). But despite this reformist strategy, Mauritania was entering a long period of instability. Taya was overthrown from power in August 2005 after heading the state for more than 20 years; his regime

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was followed by a transition (2005–2007), a democratic election (April 2007), a new coup d'état in 2008, a rectification period (2008–2009) and again a so-called democratic period (2010–). In this trajectory, instability, power struggles and the use of formal administrative and reformist practices are closely intertwined.

Drawing on the Mauritanian situation, I argue that analysing formal economic procedures and calculation practices helps us understand the way power is exercised, even in a context of massive informality and fraud.¹ In the *Report on the Revision of Macroeconomic Data 1992–2004*, not only did the government admit to faking its economic statistics over some 12 years, it also stated that during that period “macroeconomic management became increasingly inappropriate to the real situation, often with the advice of partners who had been misled, leading to the taking of measures that fostered imbalances instead of combating them” (Islamic Republic of Mauritania 2006, 7). It thus presented its management of economic policy as a structured process, consisting of “measures” and formal procedures, even if their transgression was rife. More generally, all successive regimes in Mauritania since 2003 have been characterised by predatory practices, while implementing “governance reforms” and conducting programs for the “moralisation of public life”. Repertoires of transgression and circumvention have thus continuously cohabited with those of legalism and technocratic modernisation. I therefore argue that Mauritanian political transformations can be studied through the lens of its changing economic management procedures. In this direction, I propose to shed a new light on Mauritanian political trajectories over the period 2003–2011.

This article builds on the approach that sociologists and historians of quantification like Theodore Porter or Alain Desrosières have developed in non-African countries (Porter 1995; Desrosières 1998, 2003). Their works have shown that studying the state’s statistical practices from a sociological perspective enables us to question the different “ways of acting on the economy” through numbers, as well as the political legitimacy associated with the production and use of these quantitative techniques. Adopting such a perspective requires observing the concrete practices of economic policy management.

This has not been widely done to analyse African countries and the so-called “developing world”. In order to do so, I also draw on some anthropological works, like Jane Guyer’s studies of calculation practices and numbers in African economies (Guyer 2004), and on a political sociology of the state in Africa derived from the works of Jean-François Bayart (Bayart 2009) and Beatrice Hibou (Hibou 2011a). This way I can shed a sociological and political light on the links between economic calculation practices, economic stories and national trajectories that some other researchers have approached in a more historical perspective, like Morten Jerven on national income (Jerven 2013) or Vincent Bonnacase on poverty (Bonnacase 2011). Therefore, while building on the Mauritanian case, I believe the present article should also help understanding other national situations, in Africa and more generally in countries managing their economies in close relations with international financial institutions, especially the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Informalisation of the state and economic management procedures at the end of Taya’s regime (2003–2005)

Institutions, informality and the exercise of power

At the beginning of the 2000s, Mauritania had spent a great many years as the “model pupil” of international organisations and adjustment. In 2003–2004, international institutions still regarded the country as having accomplished “an impressive array of structural and macroeconomic reforms” (IMF 2003, 6). Mauritania was allowed to participate in all the pilot schemes, for example drawing up one of the first Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) in Africa, and being a very early beneficiary of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative.

However, bureaucratic activities and state management in Mauritania have long operated in a context of massive informality and fraud. Macroeconomic policies offer a striking example of this: the scale of the circumvention reflected in the falsification of public accounts in the period 2000–2005 undermines the very principle of a state budget and, still more, of any possibility of steering the economy. Extra-budgetary expenditure reached 40 per cent of the budget in 2003, representing almost 12 per cent of official GDP at that time (Islamic Republic of Mauritania 2006). In 2004, three distinct budgetary exercises were carried out simultaneously, with none of the three annual accounts ever being closed, making it impossible to audit or monitor expenditure in any reliable way (IMF 2005, 16). An analysis of this type of situation forces us to leave normative concepts aside, notably in dealing with institutional logics.

Indeed the official administrative functions are often illusory. Until 2005, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Development (MAED) owed much of its prestige not to its role as “coordinator of social and economic policies”, but to the management of many development projects for which it was given direct responsibility in a largely discretionary manner. One of these projects involved the richly funded unit in charge of education reform, which was placed under the authority of the MAED, thereby escaping that of the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Fisheries, which collected fines and payments while running the trade in fishing licences, was also a site of major powers since, contrary to regulations, it did not pass on these “public receipts” to the Treasury. Conversely, the upper ranks of the police depended largely on funding from “outside” the state, and more precisely on the national transport federation, which was in the hands of businessmen from the president’s tribe, who had a monopoly in the sector at the time.² More generally, as in many countries coming out of adjustment, the proliferation of agencies, commissions, semi-public businesses and major projects made the public sector appear highly fragmented into a great many coveted centres of power and, to some extent, comprising a set of obscurely structured “fiefs”. The bureaucratic work of the public administration was thus underpinned by a situation in which institutional functions were often dominated by power relations and access to resources.

Several elements can help to explain how Mauritania could be a “good pupil” while showing signs of massive informality in its public management. Mauritania only played the card of democratisation and of the docile acceptance of structural adjustment after a particularly traumatic period in the 1980s, marked by the ethnic violence of 1989 that was a legacy of the difficult birth of a young “frontier state”, prey to many centrifugal forces (Ould Ahmed Salem 2004), and in which the state played a central role. Since the 1980s, the Mauritanian regime has taken refuge in stabilisation through a tribal management of public resources (Marchesin 1992), containing the deep socio-political rifts using authoritarian and clientelist practices (N’diaye 2006). By maintaining its status of the “good pupil”, it thus often set itself apart in order to ensure a flow of income from outside, which was necessary both for security (Jourde 2007) and to supply government clients. At the beginning of the 2000 decade, Mauritania was managing its many political and social tensions by harvesting the fruits of its “model pupil” status and keeping up the appearances of reform.

Of course, there is nothing new about a situation in which aid goes hand in hand with authoritarian, and clientelist domination, giving rise to a “reformist façade”.³ But the way the different repertoires combined in Mauritania is far from anecdotal interest. On the one hand, Mauritania is an open society, Nouakchott being a city of salons where information always gets out in rumours and where many people and groups are aware of what the authorities and business get up to. But at the beginning of the 2000s, the regime’s chosen weapons were silence and weasel words. Censorship of the press was frequent, by virtue of a law of 1991⁴ that was not abolished until the democratic transition of 2006, and the apparatus of repression was omnipresent, with social and political life regulated by “information bulletins”. When, it was discovered in 2004 that public sector data had been widely instrumentalised – which was a sign of the major disorder that prevailed in the economic and financial administrations – silence reigned. Economic management practices preserved

an appearance of normality, but they were in fact also submitted to discipline and surveillance. For example, the simple mention of a parallel exchange market in a newspaper would be censored, although this market was massive and functioned openly, and the IMF had no more permission to mention it than the newspapers.⁵ Similarly, since the retail price index was falsified, discussion of the causes of inflation was taboo. The most ordinary economic practices provided occasions for both massive circumvention and authoritarian practices.

Hence, while infringements were widespread until the end of the Taya era, the rules were more or less formally preserved, and they even acted as tools of power and oppression.

In these years, Mauritania was also subject to a great deal of informality linked to a rush to appropriate the multiple national rents. In the forefront was the prospect of the arrival of the oil industry, officially announced by Taya on 28 November 2002, which led to a doubling of the state budget by 2010. Although hopes of an oil boom soon disappeared, their effects on the economy were massive, notably through highly optimistic forecasts that made the national market “attractive”. They generated a great deal of national and international investments (in construction, infrastructure and services, for example) and an accompanying housing boom. In addition, fishing, iron ore industry and the development aid contributed to make public money abundant and providential (Ould Ahmed Salem 2008). The state, to use the expression of Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, could be compared to a “boutique structure” (Ould Cheikh 2006). This obviously had multiple consequences for economic management, as attested by the mechanisms for falsifying data that I shall describe below.

Informalisation and economic management procedures: the falsification of economic and financial statistics

Informal management of resources at the heart of the economic fiction

By 2003, the falsification of the macroeconomic accounts had reached an impressive scale: as shown by the re-evaluation undertaken in 2005 and 2006, the money supply was twice as big as that shown in the official statistics. The currency reserves, officially representing 12 months of imports, in fact covered two weeks. The figures had been falsified since 1992 at least, and on a grand scale since 1995 (Islamic Republic of Mauritania 2006). They masked illegal uses of public money, the provision of funds to private individuals and fraudulent access to the currency reserves. Several types of mechanism were used: so-called extra-budgetary expenditure, in other words public expenditure carried out by the Treasury but without legal authorisation; the anarchic opening of credit facilities with the Central Bank; debits to the Treasury’s accounts at the Central Bank without the knowledge of the Ministry of Finance; privileged access to the exchange market for some individuals; and so on. From 1995, many of these sums initially corresponded to military expenditure ordered by the president of the republic.⁶ In addition, some major public programmes operated off-budget, such as the emergency food programmes of 2003 and 2004. Lastly, as discovered later, particularly lucrative operations were carried out behind the back of the Central Bank for the profit of individuals. For example, credit facilities were made available to primary banks without justification in 2001 and 2002, as was widely publicised when some of the country’s most important businessmen belonging to the tribe of the former president were sent to prison in 2009 (Cherif 2009).

The role of the IMF in national economic calculation procedures

The management of financial and economic policies also involved formal procedures. The IMF teams notably played a crucial part in the process of constructing the economic picture. Their interventions provided the underlying procedures on the basis of which policies were developed

and to which administrative activity was linked. As a recipient of IMF loans until 2005, Mauritania was also subject to the constant “monitoring” of its policies and statistical indicators by IMF teams, who went to Nouakchott at least three or four times a year. They worked closely with the Mauritanian authorities, providing very concrete support to the development of economic policies: they discussed the consistency of the figures; the techniques used to produce them; how they should be interpreted; the technical hypotheses on which they were based; and so on. Ultimately, the IMF teams actually validated the economic policies and statistical data on which access to funds was based.⁷ So we can say that the statistical fiction that remained in place for over 15 years really was built up before their eyes. The question is not even whether or not these officials knew whether the figures were flawed. The fact is that they were continuously monitoring the methodologies and building the base on which the fiction was elaborated by the government.

We can go even further. Government departments talked to each other very little in the years 2003–2005. The withholding of information was at its height at the end of the Taya era. During this period interministerial cooperation, and even that between divisions and departments within a single institution, was completely blocked by the impossibility of gaining access to the other side’s information, which was totally inconsistent and, therefore, kept highly secret. For example, just as it was extremely difficult for the national accounts unit of the National Office for Statistics (ONS) to obtain information from the customs directorate of the Ministry of Finance, so it was sometimes very difficult, within the ONS itself, to gather detailed figures in relation to prices, although these were produced by another unit in the same building. Meanwhile, a bureaucratic coping system was established to get round the barriers: so, when officials from the MAED were granted the privilege of obtaining data that ONS departments could not get hold of – such as information on fishing and customs – they would pass them on to their colleagues and vice versa. Many administrative relationships were contingent on the small details of everyday office life, interpersonal relationships, friendships and even tribal relationships. The same was true, in a more exacerbated form, when it came to defining “economic policy”: for example, the budgetary forecasts prepared by the Ministry of Finances were transmitted to other ministries only with difficulty, including to those colleagues who were theoretically closest, such as those at the Ministry of Economy. In such an opaque context, formulating any economic policy was a very delicate matter; administrative compartmentalisation, opacity and informality reigned against a background of false accounting.

But, at the same time, the IMF and its procedures played a key role in coordinating the Mauritanian technical work. As an IMF member Mauritania was under statutory obligation to pass on data to the IMF teams, who thus created centralised sets of figures that no national institution could have put together. The procedures by which macroeconomic policies were formulated thus radiated out from around the IMF teams. They alone were able to produce an overall view of the economy and put together all the pieces of the puzzle. In practice this meant that procedures for formulating economic and financial policy existed, but were not centralised within the government. The formalisation process was broadly coordinated, more or less unknowingly, by the IMF itself. This is a crucial observation: rather than being a carefully planned and fully controlled construction, the lie was based on an “anarchy” of bureaucratic procedures (Blum and Mespoulet 2003) deployed around a set of international procedures and rules.

Putting an indistinguishable reality into numbers

This confusion was reinforced by the fact that the misuse of resources was a haphazard affair. To borrow the words of a former high-ranking official, for a long time it was so easy to open illegal credit facilities at the Central Bank, that all those who were in a position to do so “helped

themselves from the till". When the new governor, Zeine Ould Zeidane, arrived in July 2004, 95 per cent of open accounts were not legitimate.⁸ Where the budget was concerned, the mechanisms seem equally haphazard: major emergency programmes conducted on an entirely extra-budgetary basis and run from high up in the administration (for example at the time of the droughts of 2003, or the anti-locust campaigns of 2004) coexisted with the processing of everyday expenses, which managers would unofficially send to the budget office because it was simpler and more flexible to do so. Accelerated and extra-budgetary procedures would be used to acquire a ream of paper or for the reception of an important guest. It was easier to incur expenses using exceptional budget procedures ("automatic debit letter" or "request for immediate payment") and thereby circumvent the entire monitoring system.

Thus, lies happened while – and partly because – a multiform and largely unrecorded reality was to be quantified in figures. The national and international economic experts, by putting a largely indistinguishable reality into numbers, were at the same time guardians of the norms and producing the fiction. Sometimes, however, the gap would become too large and the existence of a real lie would become obvious. For example, in 2003 and 2004, the authorities claimed to have enough foreign currency reserves to convert the entire official money supply, while at the same time the parallel exchange rate was constantly rising, a sign that the monetary authorities did not have enough hard currency to stabilise the Mauritanian currency (ouguiya).

This enables us to understand better how the Mauritanian government was able to say, in 2006, that it had formulated its economic policies on the basis of erroneous data. The formal economic procedures were intrinsically meshed with the means to circumvent them. We also understand that IMF procedures had structured the production of economic aggregates, because they obliged the government to put the economy into numbers. The figures were flawed because they could not account for the informal mechanisms driving the economy, but they reflected the use of international methods.⁹

The collapse of the fiction

The fiction fell apart between 2004 and 2005, in the context of a broad movement to deligitimise Taya's power. In the national administration, international organisations or economic spheres, everybody knew that the statistics were very fragile, so it was not a real surprise. It was, for example, widely known that price statistics or external trade statistics were not accurate because of the use of flawed methods (Samuel 2011). However, the scale of the lies was much greater than anybody could guess. The starting point for the "discovery" of the fiction was a change of regulation at the IMF (safeguards assessment policy), which, in 2003, led the fund's departments to ask for an entirely routine audit of the Central Bank's foreign exchange reserves. But the Mauritanian authorities refused, for fear of being unmasked, particularly as the foreign exchange reserves were one of the most heavily falsified indicators. The authorities thus tried to gain time and kept the IMF at bay in 2003, and again in 2004. But in the struggle a corner of the veil of deceitful statistics was gradually lifted, revealing illegal practices that proved central to the spiral ending in Taya's downfall.

By this time, the plundering of public resources, which had taken place on an unprecedented scale from 2000, started to have untenable consequences. First, the decidedly "expansionist" budgetary and monetary policies and the trade in currencies caused a wave of inflation and devaluation of the ouguiya; this caused the prices of food and imported products to shoot up, fostering a sense of frustration and exacerbating discontent among Mauritanian people. Numerous tensions emerged among the elite in the battles over the appropriation of resources; for example, around the fallout from oil exploitation (Augé 2007; Bensaâd 2007). And when Taya, who appointed Zeine Ould Zeidane as governor of the Central Bank in the summer of 2004, played the card

of confessing its lies at the IMF, the regime made enemies of some of the businessmen closest to the centres of power, who had done very well out of the system. Therefore, Taya was ultimately left behind in the race for appropriation of resources. The regime was rendered still more unstable by the security situation – an attack by the GSPC (Salafist group for preaching and combat) shook the north of the country in the summer of 2004 – and by the consequences of the presidential election fiasco of 2003, which saw Taya re-elected at the price of all kinds of repression used against the opposition and his political opponents (Bensaâd 2006). These events in turn encouraged the falsification of the figures, since massive military spending was carried out off-budget in 2003 and 2004, to which expenditure on the electoral campaign was added. All in all, the economic fiction was fuelled by a series of elements that combined to delegitimise the regime, while the discovery of the deception made the government's position worse, creating a vicious circle.

So, beyond its purely technical significance, the revelation of the falsification of the figures and the end of the economic fiction should be understood as the collapse of a mode of domination. While the revelation of the fiction was triggered and caused by the reserves audit, it represented a far more complex and multiform event.

Technocrats and the exercise of power: accumulation and modernisation of the state

In an apparent paradox, however, a relative technocratic autonomy cohabited during Taya's era with procedural anarchy. In a manner similar to the role played by the IMF officials in the statistical fiction, technocratic language was omnipresent inside the administration. The work of the technocrats involved wielding economic language in an environment marked by pervasive transgression, but the presence of a technocratic ethos was actually not incompatible with deception, not even with power struggles.¹⁰

Technical knowledge and the modernisation market

Administrative engineering was central to an important "market in modernisation". Technocratic operations received a great deal of finance, both from the state and in the form of aid provided by international donors as part of "capacity building" and "institutional development", which had been development watchwords since the late 1990s.

Very large sums were indeed devoted to modernising the state. The resulting modernisation market undoubtedly engendered a "rent-based economy", leading to spending on a plethora of dubious projects, consultations that were not properly targeted, and the organisation of workshops with their attendant buffets and directors' fees. But to describe the political economy of reform and modernisation, we need to go further. For example, when a World Bank Trust Fund finances the production of a "poverty profile" or a "poverty map", as it did in 2004, and this to the tune of several hundred million dollars, should we see it as no more than a wafer-thin technocratic facade? Not necessarily. To do so would be to neglect that, even in the Mauritanian sociopolitical context, managers and leaders of the economic and financial administration do share a technocratic interpretation of reality and, to a certain extent, a belief in the power of technique to underpin ways of governing. To this extent it is possible that "aid rents", despite being reappropriated in many different ways, may lead to the adoption of "modernising" practices, informed by knowledge and skills. We can even seek to identify elements of a "demand for modernisation" in this market (Hibou 2011b).

The example of macroeconomic forecasting provides an interesting example of this demand. The macroeconomic modelling that has proliferated in Mauritania in the last 10 years is an invariant of capacity building projects, even though the figures were long falsified, and are anyway largely produced at the interface with the IMF. A range of international experts have nevertheless

been called on from time to time by the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the ONS and Ministry of Finance to launch a new study in search of the right model. Organisations approached by the ministries have included the World Bank, the French Statistical Institute, Afristat or the African Development Bank. How should this be understood? In practice, methods of macroeconomic forecasting are of major practical and symbolic importance to directors and top officials in the Ministries of the Economy and Finance (Samuel 2011).

One aim in improving them is to gain greater power in negotiations with the IMF and the World Bank. Moreover, forecasting structures a raft of relationships within the administration. It provides the basis for collaboration (through the transmission of statistical data) and simultaneously for emulation between departments, even in the unstable, compartmentalised conditions we have described. The different Directorates of Finances, Planning and the Central Bank thus compete to have their forecasts prevail, for example in relation to taxation during the preparation of annual exercises such as the budget, and exchange these forecasts either directly or through the IMF. In addition, models also play a part in international activities, since experiences are exchanged between the teams of forecasters and economists of different countries in sub-Saharan and North Africa, and indeed between oil producing countries,¹¹ which meet at many international and regional seminars. So we can see why in Mauritania there is consequently not only a demand, but also, in a sense, a “race for models”.

When use of the Model of the Mauritanian Economy (MEMAU),¹² Mauritania’s historical model hosted by the MAED, gradually fell away, its replacement gave rise to a great many projects. While the fortunes of these research projects differed, some produced concrete results (such as the so-called Tablo model, a recent updating of MEMAU, and the World Bank’s Poverty Analysis Macroeconomic Simulator [PAMS] model). Beyond the objective to help making the best possible decisions, the sophisticated “ritual” of quantification was driving Mauritanian economists (Power 1999).

All this suggests that a technocratic ethos based on expertise and a certain understanding of ways of “managing the economy” (Desrosières 2003) could exist within administrative departments, and drive their work, even in a context of informality. The expertise market was not even linked solely to the availability of external funding and “extraversion rents”. In the modelling field, projects emerged that were financed entirely from within Mauritania. For example, the Explorer Center, set up in 2003–2004, used its own funds to bring in French researchers and ran sessions financed by the Mauritanian state. Moreover, bonuses were long paid to managers and public agents in the economic and financial departments who were working to establish macroeconomic forecasts. This contextualisation of modelling can of course be applied, to different degrees, to many other techniques. Typically, some instruments in fashion in the development world, such as “medium-term expenditure frameworks”, exerted an attraction over administrative departments (Samuel 2009). This attraction exerted by technical productions, rarely considered in discussions of the work of administrative departments in Africa, was very real, however paradoxical.

The emergence of an elite of experts

It is also notable that technocratic and technical competences led to the formation of dominant groups, even if their skills were later lost in an administration operating primarily through the interplay of influence and accommodation. So, for 10 years a small group of high-ranking officials with the profile of international experts controlled Mauritania’s finances, steered the economy and guided the “reforms” from within a small club of relatively stable economic and financial institutions (MAED, ONS, Mauritanian Centre for Policy Analysis [CMAP], Ministry of Finance, Central Bank of Mauritania [BCM]). The managers of these institutions worked very closely

together and were generally products of the major French universities and schools (such as the École nationale d'administration [ÉNA]); they had often taken the same courses and had since developed a sense of solidarity, or even a kind of corporatism. The functioning of the Mauritanian administrative system facilitated the rapid rise of technocrats, some very brilliant, who were of course appreciated by donors and lenders and ran the country from the administrative departments of the economics and finance ministries. Some also moved on to the political stage.

This was true of Zeine Ould Zeidane who, in a few years, moved from running a macroeconomic model in a small planning department office to the post of prime minister. In the course of this rise, he built up a reputation for technical skill¹³ (and people skills, since he is married to the daughter of General Boukheiss, one of Taya's closer allies). But in this he followed a long line of politicians who made their careers on, among other things, their image as technocrats, such as former Prime Minister Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar, who owed his reputation to his image as a considered and enlightened expert, and Mohamedou Ould Michel, who has just retired but was still an advisor to the 2007 elected President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi after a long career under Taya.

Of course, I am not seeking to turn these figures into virtuous "heroes", but to emphasise that, contrary to what is generally believed (Banégas and Warnier 2001), "models of success" also value the role of technocratic competence in driving successful careers and relationships of domination. By the way, legitimation by competence combines with other repertoires of power. Director and later Minister of Planning Abdallahi Ould Cheikh Sidya was the illustrious descendant of a marabout family and an ÉNA graduate who long remained typical of the elite and was respected as much for his prestigious birth as for his competent image. That he was, as head of Planning before 2004, one of the architects of the great falsification operation did not affect his prestige. There is nothing unusual about this combination between trickery, technical and aristocratic repertoires in Mauritania (Ould Ahmed Salem 2001).

So the profiles of technocrats can provide a source of legitimacy, even when circumvention of the rules is the rule itself. In the moral economy of trickery (*tcheb-tchib*) described by Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem (2001), technical dexterity and understanding are certainly not discredited; indeed, they are very useful to the *el-gazra*, the squatter skilled in the use of deceit to appropriate public resources. This confirms what Jean-François Bayart has shown about the Cameroonian *feymen*, who use their skills in trickery at the interface between the state, global procedures and deeply rooted social values (Bayart 2004; Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999; Malaquais 2001); it also confirms Beatrice Hibou's findings that the social value of trickery is often to be seen at the heart of formal economic management procedures (Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999). What the Mauritanian case tells us here goes one step further, however: even in a situation where the fraud is massive, technocratic skills can be valued for themselves and be combined with deceit in the everyday management of the state.

Of course, appointments are often based on influence, nepotism and tribal and ethnic criteria (Marchesin 1992). Very often, managers find their careers blocked because of their ethnic or tribal origins, which may influence the course of their entire careers (Ould Cheikh 1998). But competence and technical skills are nonetheless evident criteria in the rise of many Mauritanian figures and underpin one vision of the state and government. From this point of view there is no inevitable contradiction between the valuing of competence, the modernising ethos and transgressive management practices in the administration, in which these same officials are also involved, as I shall show.

Overlaps between positions of "reform" and accumulation

An instrumental reading would assume that governance reforms seek to prevent the diversion of funds and quest for gain. But an analysis "from below" (Bayart, Mbembe, and Toulabor 2008) of

administrative practices shows on the contrary that the repertoires of modernisation can combine with those of speculation in the everyday management of public administration. The first example is the private consultancy work undertaken by many officials.¹⁴ All technically effective officials can expect to gain consultancy contracts in the specialist fields they work in as public servants, and of course render their administrative posts profitable through the revenue generated by their private work.

This means that they are also “development brokers” profiting from the governance market (Bierschenk, Chauveau, and Olivier de Sardan 2000; Lewis and Mosse 2006; Blundo and Le Meur 2009). I shall return to this later, as another, less obvious overlap must be noted. The accumulation of different administrative functions sometimes enables individuals to combine a number of assignments that give them direct responsibility to manage resources with work on administrative engineering and reform intended to improve governance. Because activities in both fields are performed by the same people, they can be subject to a kind of vertical integration, thereby creating wide margins for manoeuvre. A paradigmatic illustration of this is offered by the directorate of education and training projects, which, until 2007, was in charge of reforming the education sector.¹⁵ This directorate monitored all the governance reforms in the education sector, carried out periodic evaluations of aid programmes, but it was also responsible for the effective use of a large share of the funds provided by the International Education for All Initiative. It long had control over extrabudgetary funds, an arrangement often criticised for its opacity (the aid provided for this programme was “budgetised” in the donors’ eyes, but it made only a rapid detour through the Treasury coffers).

The man who was long the director of education and training, Weddoud Kamil, is known for his technical abilities – he is an international expert on education planning – but was much criticised for the opacity of his management. We should mention that he is also the brother-in-law of Maaouya Ould Taya. In practice, such situations are common. People at the MAED prepare the state’s investment budget, supervise the transfer of funds to project heads and prepare the statistics that are used to evaluate macroeconomic performance and respect of expenditure ceilings. The same people are thus in a position both to promote the new tools of rigour – for which they benefit from training and capacity building programmes – to manage the funds, and to falsify the figures, so they develop a highly polysemous relationship to the “sums”. Such mechanisms explain how, in Mauritania as in almost all the countries of Africa, state investment figures are systematically underestimated in order to get round the ceilings set by the IMF.

“Marginal gains” and technical skills

We could even go so far as to state that certain economic policy operations can in fact be assimilated into “transactions”, combining predatory activities with the mobilisation of skills and knowledge. We have heard witnesses speak of extreme cases in which statistical tables relating to the public finances were bought from high-ranking civil servants by international officials. The justification given was that these tables were not immediately accessible and required a degree of expertise. In addition, they were vital to the writing of an evaluation report that had to be drawn up by the international financial institutions. Furthermore, the figures were produced at the very period of the statistical lies. Such cases are very interesting, because they combine many elements in a single “transaction”: technical competence; individual interest; “privatisation” of the administration (Hibou 2004); production of the economic fiction; working methods of international organisations. Such mechanisms – which very precisely materialise the “marginal gains” described by Jane Guyer in elucidating the functioning of what she calls “formalities” (Guyer 2004) – help us understand how a concrete combination of different and apparently contradictory repertoires can operate within procedures for the “management” of the public finances.

Therefore, an ethos of modernisation can blossom in the shadow of networks of influence, all in the name of promoting a state underpinned by law and rationality. The polysemous, ambivalent nature of reforms and technocratic activities also explain how forms of domination can emerge out of modernising activities. It also contributes, more or less paradoxically, to lay the foundations for a certain kind of “technocratic legitimacy” (Hibou 2011b).

I now turn to the dynamics of formalisation and informalisation of the state to analyse the trajectories of the power after the end of the Taya regime, in August 2005.

The “transition to democracy” (2005–2008): power struggles and reformist feats

In August 2005, President Taya was overthrown by his own colonels, whose leader, Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, took over as head of a military council for justice and democracy (CMJD) and raised many hopes with a policy of transition to democracy. During the transition period, among a broad series of reforms, the economic figures were corrected and a new economic history was built with the help of the international organisations, as witnessed by the *Report on The Revision of Macroeconomic Figures 1992–2004* (Islamic Republic of Mauritania 2006). Such reforms undoubtedly conferred a high degree of legitimacy on the transition, but they remained ambivalent, the priority of the government being to restore the international trust and the flow of international aid as quickly as possible. Mauritania reconnected indeed with the IMF in the first half of 2006, benefiting from debt rescheduling only a few months later, but away from this visible activity the greater part of the administration was kept in a state of relative apathy. The “democratic” period opened with the presidential elections of April 2007 that brought President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi to power. The Consultative group meeting held in Paris in December 2007, originated in the period of the CMJD, is an interesting moment to relocate technocratic issues within the economic and political trajectory of Mauritania.

The return of the “model country”

During 2006, the work that had been halted after the fall of Taya was gradually restarted in the summer of 2005. The PRSP, left dormant by the transition government was restarted on the insistence of donors, who needed a programme on which to base their support for the transition and democratisation. Meanwhile, discussions with the IMF and the World Bank also raised again the need for a “medium-term expenditure framework” (MTEF) in order to identify the broad choices for state expenditure. The demand for planning was thus very high. A working group on the MTEF met in 2006, comprising the Ministries of the Economy and Finance and various peripheral actors. But the exercise proved complex and laborious. The transition and its major political manoeuvres were underway; elections were in prospect and large-scale administrative studies were out of favour with the economic and financial directorates. In addition, the macroeconomic data revision was still fresh, whereas the preparation of an MTEF demanded an unprecedented abundance of details. Mauritania was also bringing in its first oil receipts and plans for the use of budgetary resources were far from settled. Moreover, collaboration between the administrative directorates of the Ministries of the Economy and Finance proved difficult, and the working group did not really seem to be a priority for those involved. All these elements made the exercise difficult.

However, the resident representative of the World Bank, who had recently arrived in the country, was working hard to turn Mauritania into an example of “best practice”; he probably also wanted to use his time there as a launching pad for his own rise through his organisation. To this end he planned to promote the development of a collaborative Country Assistance

Strategy (CAS) for the World Bank, which would then make it possible to set up a “model” Consultative group. Once the Mauritanian transition was well underway, the representative’s plan had certain attractions; in particular, it was giving weight to the reprise of partnerships between the government and donors, who were actively sponsoring democratisation.

For this it was crucial to have an MTEF as the underlying programme. But work on the MTEF in the Ministry of Finance and the MAED was behind schedule. The resident representative became impatient. Eventually, wearied by the lack of success encountered by his initiative, he looked around for alternative solutions and seized the opportunity offered by other ongoing works to get round the difficulties. In the absence of any good and proper programme of the MTEF type, he fell back on far simpler, more general calculations of the sums necessary to reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). At the time, such works were in preparation by both the the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank. This was not on the same scale as the MTEF, but it made it possible to start discussions. He enjoyed the crucial support of the Minister of Economic Affairs, Mohamed Ould Abed, a high-flying civil servant, graduate of the ÉNA and *éminence grise* of many reforms carried out by the government since the late 1990s.

So a major exercise was carried out in 2006–2007 involving donors, the state administration and civil society to plan Mauritania’s development strategies. The initiative generated major events: in March 2006 large gatherings were organised using video-conferencing in multiplexes in several countries. The exercise was in tune with its time, giving rise to various presentations permitting the development of a form of language unconstrained by the empty bureaucratic rhetoric of the Taya era. As well as policies, debates focused on the functioning of Mauritanian society and its barriers, or the challenges of good management, in politico-technocratic arenas unused to such discussions. So the resident representative successfully pulled off his tour de force, driven by his personal ambitions and supported by the administration. This process, which remained technically unconvincing and very much focused on the World Bank, was nonetheless gradually transformed into a “technocratic feat” on the part of the regime.

The technocratic feat of a delegitimised regime: the Consultative group of December 2007

After the election of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi in April 2007, work began on the preparation of a Consultative group celebrating democracy. Work on the MTEF started up again. For the first time in Mauritania, detailed budgetary planning was undertaken, based on the PRSP and the funding intentions of the donors. The brand new Ministry of the Economy and Finance, reunified, provided the right framework for this kind of work, which required collaboration between the budget directorate and the directorate responsible for cooperation and planning. This collaboration went well, thanks to a great many senior executives who had been promoted while Zeine Ould Zeidane was prime minister. This time the sophisticated MTEF could be finalised. The preparation for the group achieved something hitherto unimaginable in the Mauritanian administration due to an impressive combination of favourable factors, including extensive involvement by donors, the input of highly experienced technocrats, a relative absence of barriers to the circulation of information and a “successful” democratisation that justified holding Mauritania up as an international example. The MTEF reflected a voluntarist development policy scenario and put the price of the “return of hope” at 1.6 billion dollars. The donors met at the World Bank’s offices in Paris on 4, 5 and 6 December 2007, established their contributions and, in a major bureaucratic exercise, promised donations of 2.1 billion dollars; 500 million more than the sum requested by the government – a “democratisation bonus” as Zeine Ould Zeidane put it (Meunier 2007).

However, these plans were never realised, since Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was removed from power by Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz in the summer of 2008. The coup d'état led to the suspension of all cooperation programmes for around a year, until the spring of 2009. But technocratic feats notwithstanding, a closer look shows that the Consultative group already contained all the seeds of the future instability.

In practice the Consultative group straddled the regime's internal divisions. As always, the government was a patchwork resulting from the horse-trading of appointments between the various currents and spheres. But the tensions derived from the post-electoral negotiations were particularly high. The government included military personnel from the CMJD, who got Sidi elected and imposed appointments on him, Sidi himself, who was bound by the political agreements he had made with other parties, and Zeine Ould Zeidane, who came third in the presidential election and had exchanged his support in the second round for the post of prime minister. The governmental equation was thus complex from the outset. The Consultative group gave Zeine an opportunity to impose his style through a technocratic process of which he was the prime embodiment. Indeed, the prime minister was counting on this to save his political future. He was in a very vulnerable position: he did not control his government and he was in dispute with the president, who had relieved him of the management of the most important dossiers, notably the return of refugees from Senegal, and the emergency food programme linked to the crisis of 2007–2008. So the Consultative group was very important to him, beyond the beauty of the exercise and its promises of development. But Abderrahmane Ould Hama Vezzaz, minister of the economy and finance and one of the president's men, also wanted to profit from the event, and the struggles were apparent at the time of the Paris meeting (Meunier 2008). The technocratic aspect, a key strength of Sidi's regime, thus appears at once as the element supposed to save the government's image and the focus of the internal quarrels that were destroying the same government's ability to govern (Ould Oumère 2007; Véridique 2008).

More seriously, this technocratic orientation crystallised the discontent of the Mauritanian people and helped speed up the regime's loss of legitimacy and credibility. The government was regularly accused of hiding behind piles of expert reports and being unable to meet expectations where the most important dossiers were concerned, in a context marked by intense social problems and rising prices (Tahalil Hebdo 2007). Furthermore, the reforms and good management that had been hoped for now seemed largely illusory. For example, complaints were mounting concerning the activities of President Abdallahi's inner circle, notably his wife Khattou Mint El Boukhary, who was accused of diverting public money intended for social policies via her charity. The Special Intervention Programme – a 169 million euro plan set up to alleviate the consequences of drought and rising food prices – was in practice carried out off-budget and gave rise to many instances of diversion of funds. The government had also started instrumentalising budgetary processes. The establishment of a computer program for monitoring expenditure, known as the Rachad application, symbolising the transparency of the public finances, was blocked for several months in 2007/08 in order to circumvent it.

It would probably be an exaggeration to suggest that the technocratic orientation of the regime was a cause of the subsequent divorce between government and citizens, but it was undeniably positioned at the intersection of several fault lines that caused the regime to fall. In one sense, the August 2008 coup d'état also signified the failure of a Mauritania that had played the card of formal procedures throughout the transition process. Although technocratic rhetoric was never a match for the social issues, the government had instigated sophisticated technical exercises and tried to profit from them through external rents and a modernising rhetoric that international donors often encouraged. But the main effect of this approach was to discredit the regime and increase disappointment. For a while technocratic constructions had maintained the

fiction of successful transition, but at the same time they fuelled instability, disappointment and loss of legitimacy.

The Mauritania of Aziz: the economic procedures of a fragile country fighting against terror

After his coup in August 2008, General Abdel Aziz established a “rectificatory period”. As justification for his coup d’état – perpetrated in the name of the “preservation of democracy” – he notably cited the former president’s management practices and actions judged irresponsible for national security. Mauritania was shaken by terrorist attacks and preserving the country was one of his main justifications. He faced a strong internal and external opposition. But his skilful conduct of dialogue with the political parties opposed to the putsch (the “Dakar process”) gave him legitimacy in the eyes of external partners (Antil 2010). On the national scene, a populist language and social rhetoric gave him some popularity after the coup, and facilitated his success at the ballot box organised in 2009.

Seen through the lens of economic and financial procedures, new modes of government seem to have emerged with Ould Abdel Aziz’s regime.

Economic policies under the regime of Abdel Aziz: new “ways of acting on the economy”?

Today the MAED is often cited as an example of a weakened administration. While the Ministry of the Economy and Finance was once again separated into two parallel offices in the putsch of the summer of 2008 – as seen above, the ministry had been unified in 2007 in what appeared then as a good practice – the readoption of this structure did not bring about a return to the historic division of tasks. In the separation the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Development lost its historic role in preparing and managing the investment budget, which included all donor projects. In addition, since 2008 the posts of directors have been filled by a series of risky appointments. It became common that unconcerned and even incompetent individuals hold top positions within the ministry, which is unusual for a department that has long acted as a launch pad for high-flying administrative and political careers (Boluumbal 2011). As a result, its output is often judged to be at a standstill, by both aid agencies and former or current officials. This has led to the MAED appearing as something of an “empty shell” compared to its former power, which is a matter of regret for many observers. However, such a view seems a little hasty. Leaving aside any nostalgia, its functioning also seems to reflect a new way of “governing the economy”.

First, as we have seen, for a long time one source of the MAED’s power was the many very important development projects (in education, urban development, capacity building, and so on) that came under its direct responsibility. For years this situation had been criticised by international organisations as an infringement of governance, which pushed the government to hand these project cells over to sectoral ministries in 2007. However, these projects and programmes have recently been returned to the MAED. Some commentators have justified this measure by the insufficiencies of the sectoral ministries; but aside from such arguments, it remains the case that the MAED is once more playing a pivotal role, intervening in many different sectors, and indeed concentrating power in the hands of economic administrators. Furthermore, this move, which is somewhat reminiscent of the Taya period, seems to reflect a more general redeployment of state intervention in the economy, with a great many ramifications now developing. One major development under Aziz has been the proliferation of agencies, public enterprises and organisations. A national agency for monitoring major projects (ANSP), directly linked to the president’s office, was created in 2010, with the task of monitoring and, theoretically, evaluating “presidential” projects, which are largely carried out off-budget. In 2011, a new

financial arm of the state, closely linked with the MAED (the “Caisse des dépôts et de développement”) was created in order to finance large-scale projects and intervene in public enterprises. Many public enterprises (a dozen in the field of transport alone) have also been set up to pursue many different objectives, but their dubious justifications and opacity are criticised by both the opposition and the World Bank and the IMF (World Bank 2011, 23; Union des Forces de Progrès 2011). So we should read the evolution of the MAED in parallel to this proliferation of channels of economic intervention, which contributes to the expansion of the rhizome state (Bayart 2009) and recalls the atomisation of the public sector under Taya, which paved the way for informalisation.

Another factor suggests that the MAED has regained importance: judging by the organisation of a new round table of donors in 2010, the current strategy of the MAED for raising international finance appears very well thought, making it a masterpiece for the current regime. Unlike the 2007 Consultative group, the 2010 round table was called for by the national authorities, and the minister, Sidi Ould Tah, proved very skilful at organising the event in Brussels in July 2010. Different approaches were used with each of the different donor “types”, with different issues at stake in each case. Western donors and international organisations affiliated to the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC), heirs to the classic conception of development aid, were at the centre of the event. Then there were the Arab donors who, though they do not shun the deliberations of the OECD-aligned donors, have very different networks and modes of management. Interested above all in getting their money back, dialogue around policies did not interest them in the same way. So, they were given a separate round table, held a few weeks later. This was the second time this judicious format was adopted, the first being in 2007. Lastly, negotiations with the Chinese were different again, tending to operate in semi-commercial modes (around the eventual purchase of raw materials, for example) and remained separated. The possibility of a third round table for the Chinese has been frequently raised, more or less ironically, reflecting the many efforts made by the current minister to find Chinese finance, which have been a subject of sarcasm and debate.¹⁶ The fact is that Chinese finance is important for the regime, both for the commission it generates, as denounced by many observers, and because it has become strategically crucial in a context where European aid is drying up and there are uncertainties in relation to the Arabs (Quotidien de Nouakchott 2011a). Overall, the MAED appears highly effective in deploying the science of raising external finance.

But in a major contrast with the Consultative group, it was impossible, however, for the services of the MAED and Ministry of Finance to bring an MTEF or budgetary programme to the round table. One of the main reasons was the sudden transfer of functions between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Economic Affairs. The departments no longer work readily together and, according to some managers, Ministry of Finance departments no longer want to collaborate with MAED planning units for the allocation of investment funds; meanwhile, the MAED no longer has the technical skills to undertake alone such a planning exercise. So, in contrast to the sophistication of the Consultative group of 2007, at the round table a simple list of “priority projects” requiring finance was put forward. True, this did form a basis for discussions with donors and in the MAED departments; no effort was spared to make it as “consistent” as possible with “needs”. What is interesting in this situation, apart from the administrative compartmentalisation that seems to have returned with a vengeance, is that such a list easily opens the door to various interventions and manipulations: indeed, after the MAED departments had done their work, the list was substantially amended to include promises and undertakings the president had previously given; many projects he had promised while touring the country were included in the national “priority investment programme”. The new technocratic organisation of the MAED thus opens up new margins for discretionary actions, redeploying the power games surrounding technical procedures.

From “good pupil rent” to “security rent”: the regime’s international *carte blanche*

Aid issues are also posed today in radically different terms from those of the previous regime, due to the terrorist threat which served to justify the 2008 coup d'état. And it seems that this contributes to renewing the style of economic management as well. For the preparation of the round table, the government was able to focus on the problem of security in emphasising its need for finance, but it abandoned the fine figure-based models of the MTEF. The opening chapter of the report presented at the Round Table for Mauritania thus dealt with “geostrategic” issues, calling on the countries present to show “international solidarity” and fulfil their duty to “help each other” (Islamic Republic of Mauritania 2010, 10–15); an entire paper placed in the dossier distributed to the round table’s participants was also devoted to this issue. So the rhetoric’s seems to have changed, with the planning of development policies no longer being a priority, but support for the security becoming the cornerstone of arguments for raising finance.

In the context that has prevailed in Mauritania, these factors were indeed critical in the positioning of international actors (Antil 2010). The willingness of foreign donors to support Aziz’s regime was obvious. The round table itself ended with promises of tremendous support (3.2 billion dollars). But more generally, the cooperation agencies seem to have given Aziz’s regime *carte blanche*. The delegation from the European Commission had made in 2010 budgetary aid a priority, even if assurances in relation to governance were worse than ever, and though the same European Commission had always refused to grant budgetary aid for that very reason. Furthermore, some knowledgeable observers let it be understood that IMF departments were asked not to pay too much attention to Mauritania’s record in 2010/2011, because the country was dealing with a tough security problem. If the international financial institutions have been generally lenient with the country in the past 15 years, this support went quite far. For example, this was supposedly the cause for an unexpected resignation of an IMF country economist in 2010. And informers inside public bodies confirmed that the Fund’s teams have indeed proved less than meticulous in their enquiries, even in their methods of working with figures. So the regime seems to be enjoying new margins for manoeuvre thanks to the “security rent”, which in turn would have very concrete repercussions for the conduct of economic monitoring activities.

Consultancy markets as a means of control

Another and last element supports my interpretation of the emergence of a new mode of government. Under Aziz, many high-ranking officials reputed to be competent have been bypassed on the pretext of their involvement in the “bad management” of the past. But this argument is primarily used to sideline particular people and maintain allegiances. As a result, many high-ranking skilled officials have sought refuge in consultancy work. It has indeed become commonplace to set up a consultancy and the market is flourishing. Several factors suggest that today consultancies occupy a space left vacant by the administration and that they have a stabilising role in the interplay of networks in the political arena. In the field of economics and statistics, some consultancies, such as that of Sidna Ould N’dah, former head of the national statistical office, and Didi Ould Biye, also a former high ranking official in the administration, seem in fact to be extensions of the administration. Sidna’s city centre consultancy is today the lair of “former managers”. The vast premises, with its offices, internet connection and conference room, has become an important meeting place. Sidna himself was one of Taya’s high officials, ousted following the coup d'état of 2005. Today his consultancy enables him to tender for work and coordinate many different public activities, accumulating contracts with international organisations and the state. Sidna still talks like a “director general”; he uses “we” when talking to officials and when describing what the government should do in the future. In a sense he has remained a

director general, while also being a consultant. He is moreover an active member of the National Pact for Development and Democracy – ADIL party, which includes many former top officials from the Taya period, having become allied with Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallah. After the putsch of 2008, they did not support the seizure of power by Aziz and joined the National Front for the Defence of Democracy (FNDD). However, since then they have moved closer to the president, hoping to participate in public life. But Aziz, who claims to have broken with the former chiefs, is very cautious in relation to this party. He finally included it in the presidential majority, but his promises where appointments are concerned are barely kept. On the other hand, he has not blocked them either. And while Sidna has not exactly been co-opted by those in power, nor has he been left out; he has in a sense been put in reserve through the consultancy market, as have many of his peers. To the contrary, those who formerly held posts of responsibility and have not followed the desired political direction may be “ostracised” by being deprived of consultancy opportunities.¹⁷ This shows how the market can be used as a means of control to regulate the political sphere. Today consultation is perhaps a way of recycling former elites and carrying out administrative work and, at the same time, in disciplinary terms, a way of keeping control over a section of the population and Mauritania’s high-level technocrats by regulating their access to resources in a clientelist system. It represents both the margins for manoeuvre in modern Mauritania and some of the system’s ways of accommodating and attenuating what is often authoritarian domination. But the price of all this is an ever-growing informalisation that proliferates around the formal procedures of economic management.¹⁸

Conclusion

I have described the transformations of the state in Mauritania in the period 2003–2011 by observing the concrete practices of economic policy management. I have proposed a reinterpretation of Mauritania’s political trajectory. I have shown that under Taya’s regime, despite major deception in relation to macro-economic figures revealed in 2004, calculation methods were structured around international surveillance procedures and IMF methods, even if transgression was pervasive. While economic reality was largely indistinguishable, technical expertise went hand in hand with deceit in concrete management practices, explaining how the fiction could arise. I also showed that the existence of an expert elite is central to understanding Mauritanian power relations at that time, and after. After Taya’s downfall, the regime that emerged from the democratic elections of 2007 represented a dramatic change, bringing the Mauritanian technocratic elite into the limelight, enabling some technocratic achievements, like the Consultative group of December 2007. But the coup d’état of August 2008 signified the failure of a technocratic enterprise that had fostered a fiction of successful transition and concealed some real issues of power. Lastly, the current period has seen a reconfiguration of administrative processes in which, against the background of a serious degradation of working conditions, the authorities take advantage of flawed economic and financial procedures to use new margins for manoeuvre and to reinforce the atomised and clientelistic structure of the state, while adopting the moral high ground in the fight against rampant corruption. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the state, while managed in a discretionary and authoritarian manner, is developing new forms of informalisation.

Some general points also emerge. My observations suggest that it is useful to study the formal procedures of economic management in order to decode the way they structure power relations within the state, and that such an analysis can be used to investigate political legitimacy. Such observations are classical in Europe or America, following the seminal works of Theodore Porter (1995) or Alain Desrosières (1998), but it is not the case in Africa. Some patterns emerge, which should be confronted with other African cases to give a broader sociopolitical perspective on the economic fictions in Africa (Samuel 2009; Jerven 2013, Hibou 2011a). For

example, it appears that the existence of a technocratic ethos is not incompatible with massive circumvention of the rules, nor even with power struggles. To the contrary, it reveals the coexistence and accumulation within the state of different relationships to the economy, combining trickery and technical expertise. Unlike most theories of neopatrimonial or failed states would present it, technical competence can be a legitimate repertoire and to some extent condition upward social mobility.

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Notes

1. On the role of deceit and informality in Mauritania, see the work of Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem (1999, 2001).
2. The monopoly was finally dismantled in 2006 under a strong pressure from the European Commission, which regarded it as a hindrance to transport development.
3. See, of course, the seminal work by Jean-François Bayart on “the politics of the belly” (Bayart 2009). See also the works on the neopatrimonial state, for example (Chabal and Daloz 1999) or analysis by political economists (Van de Walle 2001; Hibou 2011a).
4. The article 11 of the Legal order of 25 July 1991 on freedom of the press.
5. A growing gap between the official and parallel rates of foreign currencies (that is, the rates on the illegal market) is a sign of speculation and indicates that the country is running short of currencies.
6. According to a former Central Bank official, personal communication, Nouakchott, July 2011.
7. For an excellent analysis of the IMF's methods from a social science perspective, see Richard Harper (2007).
8. According to a former Central Bank official, personal communication, Nouakchott, April 2011
9. We can relate this with Jerven's reflection on the “production boundary”, which shows the role of methodological choices in building an economic narrative (Jerven 2013)
10. Many studies have shown this in non-African cases (Porter 1995; Desrosières 2003; Terray 2003).
11. Indonesia offered support with the production of models in 2006 in the frame of the *Projet d'appui à la gestion de l'énergie et du pétrole*.
12. The MEMAU was created with the support of the German cooperation in the mid-1990s.
13. Until the year 2014, the Wikipedia page devoted to him has continuously mentioned these various technocratic feats, notably in relation to modelling.
14. Many works have described the role of consultancy markets and firms in the reform of the state: for example, on the United Kingdom (Power 1999) or France (Pierru and Henry 2012).
15. But part of the MAED rather than the Ministry of Education.
16. As in the case of the controversial fishing contracts with the Chinese company Poly Hondone (Quotidien de Nouakchott 2011b).
17. Personal communications, Nouakchott, January and April 2011.
18. On the link between “formalities” and “informalities”, see the seminal work of Michel de Certeau (1984), and Hibou (2011b).

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